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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 LILONGWE 000056

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DEPT FOR AF/S - ELIZABETH PELLETREAU

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [MI](#)
SUBJECT: MALAWI: UNITED DEMOCRATIC FRONT - NO LONGER UNITED
OR DEMOCRATIC

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¶1. (C) Summary: The United Democratic Front (UDF) governed Malawi from its return to democracy in 1994 until President Mutharika's unexpected break with the UDF in 2005. Former President Bakili Muluzi continues to preside over the UDF, but his grip on both the party and its mostly southern electorate appears to be weakening. After alienating many top party officials and presidential hopefuls by imposing Mutharika as the presidential candidate in the 2004 elections, Muluzi continues to lose the support of high-ranking party members by insisting on running again himself in 2009. Several influential UDF members confided to Emboffs that even if court rulings eventually resolve legal questions concerning another Muluzi presidential term, the lack of democracy within the party could prompt a number of key figures to strike out on their own, or flee to Mutharika's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Most potential competitors within the UDF are afraid to confront Muluzi publicly, however, and appear to be hoping that court rulings or popular pressure will force the former president to step aside. COMMENT: A crumbling UDF is good for President Mutharika, since the latter also hopes to harvest most of his votes in 2009 from Malawi's populous southern region. In the long term, however, the UDF's collapse would mark the end of the vibrant, diverse political organization that helped deliver Malawi from dictatorship. End Summary.

The Decline of a Democratic Movement

¶2. (C) The UDF was originally formed in 1991 as an underground organization by a diverse group of Malawian professionals from around the country who sought an end to the dictatorship of Hastings "Kamazu" Banda. The UDF worked with a few other like-minded organizations to achieve a negotiated and relatively bloodless transition to multiparty democracy by 1994. The UDF soon found itself the strongest political vehicle in Malawi. Bakili Muluzi, then the vice-chairman of the Malawi Chamber of Commerce, was one of the organization's founding members, though not its most prominent or politically experienced one. Muluzi nevertheless used his relative wealth and appeal as a Muslim southerner to win the presidency of the UDF, and subsequently its nomination for president. Muluzi and the UDF won the country's first multiparty elections in 1994 and, after a relatively successful first term, won a second five-year mandate in 1999. Muluzi spent much of his second term scheming for a third term, however, despite the fact that a

third term would have required a Constitutional amendment. When a bill to allow re-re-election eventually failed in Parliament, Muluzi violated UDF by-laws and customs by imposing a hand-picked presidential candidate, the little-known vice chair of the central bank Bingi Mutharika, on a reluctant UDF leadership. Several highly regarded UDF leaders deserted the party's ranks at that time. The UDF's continuing political strength -- and possibly some electoral machinations -- gave Mutharika victory in 2004 elections, but Mutharika soon turned on his political godfather and formed his own political party, the DPP. Contrary to initial predictions of doom for the new president, Mutharika and his DPP have steadily increased their strength and influence using the power of the presidency, mostly at the expense of the UDF. Defections from the UDF to the new ruling party led to a loss of 44 seats in the National Assembly, leaving the rival Malawi Congress Party (MCP) with the largest bloc in parliament.

Next Generation Bridles Under Muluzi's Grip

¶3. (C) Despite the negative fallout from his choice of Mutharika, as well as negative public perceptions of corruption and inflation in his second term, former president Muluzi announced in mid-2007 that he intended to stand again as a candidate for president in 2009. The Malawian constitution states that a president can serve for a maximum of two consecutive terms, and so Muluzi and his associates have argued that since a third term would not be consecutive, he is eligible to stand. Those involved with drafting Malawi's 1995 Constitution have stated that the intention of the framers was to limit presidents to a total of two terms, and ruling party spokesman have at various times suggested that the courts would ultimately rule against Muluzi's argument. The GOM made no moves toward challenging Muluzi's candidacy in court, perhaps in order to time any injunction

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so as to leave the UDF with no time to regroup before the election. In recent months, however, a little-known lawyer named James Phiri has requested a ruling on the Muluzi question. An early and very Machiavellian interpretation of Phiri's intervention was that it was bankrolled by Muluzi himself, to stand up a straw man with a weak legal team against a phalanx of Muluzi lawyers to get the ruling Muluzi wanted. But in early January 2008, Muluzi supporters publicly stated that a group of senior UDF leaders who want Muluzi to step aside had planned and bankrolled Phiri's legal petition.

¶4. (C) No fewer than four senior UDF party members have expressed interest in running for the nomination if Muluzi would step out of the way and let the party decide its nominee through an open democratic process. The potential candidates include current Vice-President Cassim Chilumpha, former Minister of Finance Friday Jumbe, UDF Party Spokesman Sam Mpasu, and UDF founder and MP Brown Mpinganjira, who ran as an independent candidate for president in 2004 before returning to the UDF. News reports claim that VP Chilumpha, who stands accused of plotting to kill President Mutharika but is out on bail, has convened several meetings at his residence of senior UDF leaders who oppose Muluzi's candidacy. While several leaders harbor ambitions for themselves and concern for the party, however, none has been willing to openly challenge Muluzi for the nomination. All appear to be hoping that either a court ruling or public pressure will force Muluzi to abandon the race. Although there has not been a final legal ruling, many in the UDF leadership view Muluzi's liberal interpretation of the Constitution as dubious. In a separate conversation with emboffs, even Muluzi's son Atupele, a UDF member of parliament, said that it was time for Malawi to have some new blood in politics. While the younger Muluzi was carefully deferential when speaking about his father and his attempt to

run for president again, he said that all of the likely presidential candidates for 2009 were still of the generation of independence and Dr. Banda. It was sad, he said, that 2014 was the earliest that a new generation of candidates would emerge. (Note: Atupele Muluzi will not have reached the constitutionally-mandated age of 35 to run for president in 2009, but will be eligible in 2014.) Atupele, a British-educated lawyer, also echoed the need for a democratic selection process within the party for the nominee.

Base Still Supports Muluzi

¶5. (C) MP and former UDF minister Friday Jumbe told emboffs that while the elites within the UDF don't want Muluzi to be the party's nominee, much of party's the rank and file still support him, thanks in part to the former president's generous use of his wealth. Still, Jumbe estimated that 75% of the party believed that court rulings would ultimately prevent a third Muluzi run for the presidency. Jumbe maintained that while Muluzi does not support the core finances of the party, his personal expenditures on pet projects in the name of the UDF have maintained his support with the electorate. Jumbe confided that party finances are very weak and without help, the UDF could be out of money by June. Jumbe suggested that a Muluzi nomination could lead to more UDF leaders to form new parties, or join Mutharika's DPP.

Party Spokesman Drops the Party Line

¶6. (C) Of the UDF's senior leadership, only party spokesman Sam Mpasu has criticized publicly the lack of democracy within the UDF, and has even gone so far as to say that Muluzi has no chance of winning a general election. Mpasu told emboffs in mid-January that Muluzi changed the UDF's image from that of a democratic movement in 1994 to a party of intimidation and one-man rule in 2008. He commented that President Mutharika's break with UDF and subsequent "persecution" of the party on corruption charges has further weakened the party's image. Mpasu posited that without a democratic selection process for its presidential nominee, the UDF was likely doomed. He also said that Muluzi's insistence on running despite lacking a clear legal basis would handicap the party, since the ruling will likely come too late for the UDF to replace Muluzi as its candidate. Mpasu's outspoken criticisms logically resulted in his dismissal as party spokesman in late January, though he

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remains a member of the national executive committee for the moment.

Comment: Weak UDF Improves Mutharika's Chances in 2009

¶7. (C) Three likely scenarios have been sketched out to emboffs by various members of the UDF concerning the party's future. They are:

-- Muluzi is declared unable to legally stand for a third term, in which case most party insiders believe he will leave for the United Kingdom and abandon both UDF and Malawi for good.

-- UDF leaders force the issue and choose another nominee, perhaps by calling a convention without Muluzi's blessing (or financing). Most UDF insiders believe that in this situation, effectively a party split, Muluzi would turn on and attack the UDF, seriously weakening its 2009 campaign.

-- Muluzi remains the party's nominee, in which case most

UDF insiders believe the party will suffer not only a presidential defeat but also a further erosion of the party's share of the National Assembly.

Unfortunately, few UDF members are optimistic that a fourth scenario, in which Muluzi gracefully steps aside and supports his party's effort to choose its own nominee, is at all likely.

¶8. (C) Unless former president Muluzi unexpectedly bows out, President Mutharika is likely to reap significant benefits from a much weaker UDF in the 2009 elections. Mutharika also hails from the south, as do most of the MPs he has lured away from the UDF to join the new ruling DPP. The President will likely need to win at least half of the vote in Malawi's populous south in order to prevail on the national level -- a task which would otherwise be difficult given the DPP's immature grassroots political machinery. If UDF activists are divided and demoralized by party infighting and/or a diminished nominee like Muluzi, however, the DPP may find its work considerably easier.

¶9. (C) It would appear that in the long term, Malawi stands to lose a considerable democratic asset if the UDF collapses over the next year or two. At one time, the UDF pulled together a distinguished group of leaders who were able to transcend Malawi's traditional regional divisions in order to achieve a transition to multiparty democracy. It may be, however, that the UDF has already lost its ability to mobilize a broad swathe of Malawian voters for a higher purpose, and has instead deteriorated into the kind of hollow, personalistic political vehicle that is all too common in Africa. This, we would say, also describes Mutharika's DPP.

END COMMENT
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